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MY LUCKY STROKE

It was snowing hard when I turned the corner
off the highway into Bear Canyon Road . . .
lit a fire in the old wood stove
made four trips
up and down the inside twisting stairs
to bring wood enough for a day and night . . .
made lunch

I felt my right foot dragging now and then
my right hand slow to move . . .
odd sensation in the middle of my head
like a loose connection
and a bulb blinking once in a while
I figured sleep would fix it
but in the morning, worse, much worse
I called my wife and grandson
to come and get me
and over the phone I sobbed
having to ask for help
my wife knew at once
what the trouble was
we're going to the hospital

"You'll have to stay over"
surprised me I felt good
but they have to do tests
and you've a slur in your speech . . .
wheeled me out and left me in the hall
for over an hour no bottle to pee in
unable to move . . . what they said
stay in the hospital to avoid any trauma
they never heard of humiliation . . .
on Thursday the young nurse
said here's the stuff wash yourself
my right hand couldn't reach my left armpit
I practiced that all day
and next day I could reach it
Dot left me her tiny squeeze flashlight
to practice gaining grip . . .
cards flowers friends
in four days I talked so much
most of my slur disappeared
my wife Dot brought me clothes and courage . . .

I could see in the mirror
my slack right cheek
and my eye unable to wink
I practiced almost every hour
raising my cheek muscles
and winking my eye at fate
and my lucky stroke at seventy-five
it was the winking taught me
no more alcohol or cigarettes
I couldn't straighten out
the first two fingers of my right hand

so I held them closed with my left
and made them work to straighten out . . .

II
Casa Colina, in the stroke unit

Dot kissed me goodbye
in a room with four we're caught in a common net
feel the bond and help each other get out . . .
group session discussions . . .
testing memory and meandering . . .
lunch and dinner in the dining room
get yourself there in your old wheelchair
no footrests for the weak leg learn to paddle walk
use your arms to turn the wheels
leg gets tired arm gets tired
you want to eat get your ass in there
that's me talking to myself

Dot came for dinner almost every day
brought bookkeeping from the store
a great big help to me
to know that I was needed . . .
a lot more could be done
to help the patients help themselves
be innovative with their wheelchairs . . .
sometimes I went begging
for someone to walk with me
I couldn't have a walker or walk alone
when therapists and aides were busy
Andrea would get away from head injury
and help or nephew Fred from publicity
would spare a few minutes

I wish I could remember her name
that aide was not pretty but vital
firm in friendship single mother of two
I have a dozen hugs saved up for her . . .
finally out of my wheelchair walking free
how to get in and out of the shower
how to make coffee fill out a form
what do you want to do when you get home
I want to walk to work and to write . . .
one comment I hear
you're completely recovered
no one ever completely recovers
but learns new ways and quite likely for the better
I had thought I could do anything and as much
as I wanted
it took a lucky stroke to tell me
it just ain't so.

CHARLES CHASE©
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Charles Chase is pictured on the cover of this special issue busily working at one of his hobbies after recovering from the illness he describes in this condensation of his poem, "My Lucky Stroke." He owns a folk music store in southern California.